Upstairs, Downstairs and in Milady's

UPSTAIRS AT THE WHITE HOUSE: My Life with the First Ladies. By J. B. West with Mary Lynn Kotz. Coward, McCann & Geoghegan. 381 pp. $8.95

By ANNE CHAMBERLIN

LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE around here, the White House has had some narrow squeaks. The British tried to burn it down; the Army Engineers wanted to paint it black; it nearly collapsed on the Trumans—and it was decorated in Late Motel by a New York department store. But if anything ever happens to the Chief Usher, it's time to head for the hills.

Presidents and their wives, children, pets, nurses, in-laws, guests and cronies are only transients in the President's House. The Chief Usher is the fellow who stays. He is there to greet them when they move in; he escorts their crates to the vans when they leave. In the Civil Service's rollicking prose: He "is completely responsible for the efficient operation, cleanliness and maintenance of the 132 rooms of the Executive Mansion, containing 1,600,000 cubic feet; $2,200,000 of mechanical and air conditioning equipment."

He oversees the housekeepers, butlers, maids, chefs, cooks, doormen, housemen, florists, gardeners, electricians, plumbers, store-keepers and engineers. He orders the groceries, keeps track of the bills, sees that the rugs are swept, that the plumbing works and that guests have a place to sleep and know when to show up for meals.

J. B. West spent 28 years at this work in the White House, and he soon learned that to survive, "the cardinal rule . . . is to Adapt." His book describes the six presidential life-styles he Adapted to before he retired in 1969. He is too discreet to tell Everything you were afraid to ask about life Upstairs. (He never even *mentions* Barbara Howar.) But he tells a lot more than we knew before, and his homey insights are more intriguing than you might think, in the light of later events.

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(To rebuild the entire White House, for example, cost about half as much as the bulletproof windscreens, golf carts, ice-makers and other security arrangements for San Clemente and Key Biscayne.)

For a fleeting moment, each new family moving in is awed by the old house, with its odd creaks and corners and Abraham Lincoln's ghost stalking the halls at night. But they soon get a grip on themselves, and in a cramped office by the front door the Chief Usher and his men prepare to bend with the wind.

To the Roosevelts, it was a Grand Hotel, with a separate but equal clientele—his and hers—coming and going at all hours of the day and night. Mrs. Roosevelt's social day began at breakfast, when she presided over cold eggs in the West Sitting Hall, still dressed in her wrapper. (For lunch, she scrambled the eggs herself in a silver chafing dish she brought from Hyde Park.)

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Chamber

The international guests had quirks of their own. Winston Churchill scorned the mattress in the Lincoln Bedroom and tried out all the beds in the house before settling in the rose suite, where he mostly wore no clothes whatsoever while the White House butlers "wore a path in the carpet" bearing him trays of brandy.

Madame Chiang stayed nine days, bringing her own silk sheets, which had to be hand-laundered every day and stitched back inside the heavy quilted sleeping bag she'd brought from China. Her entourage of 40 included a niece and a nephew, thought, because of their matching trousers, to be two nephews—until the shocked valets helped one of them undress (FDR called her "my boy" at dinner, but recovered brilliantly: "I call *all* young people 'my boy.' ")

Vyacheslav Molotov showed up with a gun in his suitcase.

To forestall leaks when the Japanese ambassador came to call in the tense days before Pearl Harbor, the Secret Service made a list of every single person who saw him, coming or going.

Mrs. Roosevelt kept the staff in perpetual shock. She would appear, unannounced, in a yellow bathing suit, with some letters to be mailed. Or she'd go riding alone in Rock Creek Park and come back "tired, disheveled and smelling of horse."

She was oblivious to the dust in the corners and the atrocious food, but demanded to be informed of every housekeeping detail, even when she was out of town. When her maid entered the servants' dining room, the other maids all rose to their feet.

There are no favorites in Mr. West's book. His heart belongs to the house. But everybody had a sneaker for the Trumans. The Roosevelts had been royals on their own. But if this homespun, affectionate family could make it to the palace, anybody could. And Bess Truman sent the maids home on Sunday, saying she could turn down the beds herself.

They had few guests. Margaret Truman washed her own hair (with a beer rinse). And Mrs. Truman even kept track of the eggs. ("How did we happen to spend twenty-five cents for dry ice?" she once inquired when the bills came in.)

The Trumans were the most close-knit White House family, but the Eisenhowers were the only ones to share a bedroom—and a king-sized double

bed, with a double headboard designed by Mamie herself, who exclaimed: "Now I can reach over and pat Ike on his old bald head anytime I want to!"

The President may have had five stars, but his wife was the general in the house, where no detail escaped. ("I run everything in my house," she said, as she vetoed the stag luncheon menu he had just okayed.) She was aghast at the grocery bills, shopped the newspaper specials all over town and kept track of the leftovers. ("The cooks learned to turn out lots of casseroles and ground-meat dishes. And fortunately the Eisenhowers were fond of hash.") Their food bills were never over $100 a week.

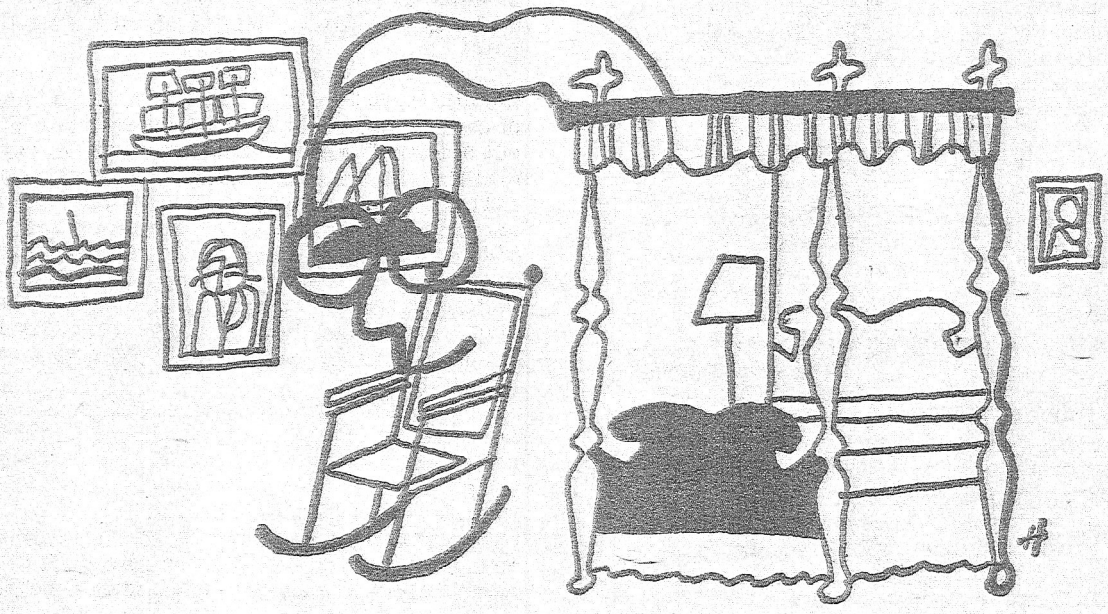
She said every woman over 50 should stay in bed until noon, and that's exactly what she did, dressed in a ruffled pink bed jacket.

Mr. West was beguiled by Camelot, but not swept off his feet. It took a lot of careful planning to achieve all that sparkling spontaneity, and President Kennedy, "perhaps because of his constant exposure during the television age, was more interested than any of the other Presidents in every nuance of what the press and the public would think about him and his family in the White House."

After the public uproar when the staff was asked to sign a pledge not to write about the White House, the Chief Usher was asked to take the blame. "We'll put out a statement saying it was your idea, and you initiated it," the President said.

The new chatelaine was slow to warm to her surroundings. She found the ground-floor hall a "dentist's office bomb shelter," and said First Lady "sounds like a saddle horse." But Mr. West rose to great heights in her behalf, and she calls him "one of the most extraordinary men I have ever met."

She persuaded him to put drop cloths, ladders, paint cans and dirty ashtrays in the guest rooms to avoid an invited, but unwanted, guest, and talked him into wearing one of her wigs and Maude Shaw's nurse's uniform to Nancy Tuckerman's birthday party. But he drew the line at asking three of his ushers to come dressed as a possum, a squirrel and a mink. He also resisted the pair of peacocks she wanted for the south lawn.



Eventually, of course, she transformed the President's House into a glittering monument, filled with priceless treasures and silken curtains woven in France by an 88-year-old Frenchman at the rate of six inches a day (and a bill for $26,149).

As she left for President Kennedy's funeral, she ordered the two Cezannes removed from the yellow oval room and replaced by early American aquatints. "This afternoon I'm going to be receiving President De Gaulle in this room," she explained, "and I want him to be aware of the heritage of the United States."

Mr. West welcomed two more families to the White House before he turned in his badge. For the Johnsons, who entertained 200,000 guests in five years, it was "like the apartment over the store." "My husband comes first, the girls second, and I will be satisfied with what's left," Mrs. Johnson told him. But she ran the place "like the chairman of the board of a large corporation."

Mrs. Nixon wanted only cottage cheese for supper the night she arrived (the one thing the chef didn't have) and revealed that "*Nobody* could sleep with Dick. He wakes up during the night, switches on the light, speaks into his tape recorder or takes notes—it's impossible."

Harry Truman used to call the place a jailhouse, and Lyndon Johnson swore he'd move back to The Elms if they couldn't fix his shower. But in the end the old house casts its spell on all of them (while "White House-itis"—an "enlargement of the cranium and a sudden desire for assistants"—afflicts their staff). They all hate to leave.

The White House somehow reasserts itself with a sort of immutable force, no matter what they do to it. But even in retirement, J.B. West can't help wishing President Nixon hadn't paved over the swimming pool. Schoolchildren sent their sticky dimes from all over the country to pay for that pool. It was therapy for FDR; Harry Truman swam sober laps with his glasses on; JFK held swimming races with his cabinet, and it brought joy to Eisenhower's grandchildren. Like Andrew Jackson's magnolias, or Grover Cleveland's maples, or changing the sheets every time anyone so much as lies down for a nap, and dumping the broken china in the Potomac, it was somehow woven into the fabric of the place. It makes you wonder if we aren't pushing our luck. □